

The Ellis Park Stadium Crowd Disaster Final Report:
“In The Interest of the Safety of Those Attending”

By

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The “Final Report: Commission of Inquiry into the Ellis Park Stadium Soccer Disaster of 11 April 2001” chaired by Judge B M Ngoepe was released to the public on September 26, 2002.

The report chronicles South Africa’s worst sports crowd disaster and provides a number of recommendations. Forty-three people were killed and more than a 150 injured at the Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg, when local teams Kaizer Chiefs & Orlando Pirates met in a high profile match on April 11, 2001. More than that, the Commission accomplishes two of its most important charges: identifying “mismanagement” and making recommendations to prevent “a similar occurrence.”

The Commission’s 130-page final report documents an appalling lack of efficient event preplanning and management and total failure by all security structures present, both private security and police, to identify risks timeously and implement measures to manage the incoming crowd safely. While the Commission does not attempt to charge any of the parties with criminal or negligence acts—it leaves that up to the courts—reading the report makes it clear who the accused would be, if, or when, prosecutions go forward.

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Unfortunately, present legislation in this country does not include sufficient health and safety measures appropriate to large scale crowd management, apart from Fire Safety and Occupational Health & Safety requirements, which are not comprehensive enough for these types of events. Thus, inexperienced or budget restricted venue operators, can and often will, only employ the minimum professional staffing and equipment required. There are emerging requirements for personnel deployed in security related tasks at public entertainment events, to be registered as Security Officers and trained to a minimum standard, but this practice is a long way from being accepted and implemented.

There is also a proposed Disaster Management Bill which will also address many of the overall responsibility issues, emergency plans and procedures and will benefit stadium management planning considerably. This Bill should become law by the end of this year. Once in place, it will give considerable authority to designated personnel from National Disaster Management, to audit and if necessary, stop major

entertainment events found lacking in planning, preparation or sufficient security and crowd management staffing.

There are other issues to be addressed. In preparation for Cricket World Cup 2003, the United Cricket Board have their own Security Directorate, stipulating numerous criteria for rendering security manpower services (which differ from Soccer), the general entertainment industry (including concerts/festivals etc., have other, different criteria. There needs to be a defined and regulated national standard applied to crowd safety measures and security staffing deployed at all public gatherings, irrespective of the nature of the event, sporting or entertainment.

Identifying Failures and Solutions

To the credit of Judge Ngoepe, The Final Report takes on the emotional, political and tragic circumstances of April 11 and does not blink. No less than 11 “factors” are identified as contributing to the Ellis Park crowd crush disaster, leaving no parties associated with the planning and management of the match untouched. The factors and parties identified by the Commission are:

- 1) Poor Forecast of Match Attendance
- 2) Failure to learn from the lessons of the past
- 3) Failure by the role players to clearly identify and designate areas
- 4) of responsibility
- 4) Absence of overall command of the Joint Operation Centre
- 5) The inappropriate and untimely announcement that tickets were sold out
- 6) Failure to adhere to FIFA and SAFA guidelines
- 7) Unbecoming spectator behaviour
- 8) Sale of tickets at the venue and unreserved seating
- 9) The use of teargas or a similar substance
- 10) Corruption on the part of certain members of security personnel
- 11) Dereliction of duty

Judge Ngoepe’s report does not stop with pointing fingers at the responsible parties or tactical and strategic failures. Sensible recommendations occupy a substantial part of the report.

In the introduction’s to the report’s formal recommendations, Judge Ngoepe stops to outlines three broad underlying themes:

- The need for statutory provisions prohibiting private use of off-duty police as security personnel
- The report’s recommendations should be applied to the running of other sports and entertainment event.
- Stringent measures should not be undertaken that could undermine the public enjoyment of soccer.

The major recommendations are, some of which include criminal charges if violated are:

- 1) Provision for matches to be categorized, according to their assessed risk.
- 2) Registration of all Security Officers to a recognised relevant body.
- 3) Regulation of the employment of security personnel.
- 4) Provision of certain minimum security enforcement facilities at stadia.
- 5) Issue of a Safety Certificate for certain categories of match / stadia.
- 6) Legislation of an inspecting authority to inspect stadia and determine acceptable minimum crowd safety standards applicable to any given match or at the commencement of the season, to each stadium.
- 7) Reserved seating is recommended over standing room and general admission.
- 8) Accurate crowd estimates are required for proper event safety planning.
- 9) Ticket touting should be made an offence.
- 10) Private security personnel should be empowered to remove rowdy spectators from the stadium, using reasonable force if necessary.
- 11) The designation of certain conduct on the part of spectators as criminal: including, entering without a ticket, entering with dangerous objects, pitch invasion and failure to obey orders of safety officials etc.
- 12) A complete nominal role to be held of all deployed personnel, both private and government service.
- 13) Members of all security companies, as well as police and army, to wear displayed name tags at all times.
- 14) The deployment of the South African National Defence Force (Army) in support of the Police at certain high risk soccer matches, to assist with crowd management.

The report further recommends the appointment of a National Safety & Security Officer (as distinct from the Professional Soccer Leagues own safety officer) This person should be a Police Officer, in terms of this recommendation.

There must be an established chain of command within the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) at matches, with a defined and accepted person in overall command. All security and police personnel would be required to obey instructions issued.

Prohibition of the abuse of alcohol is recommended. The commission report finds a direct connection between over consumption of alcohol and rowdy or unsafe audience behavior. In the author's opinion, a ban on alcohol sales within the stadium and the refusal to admit any spectator suspected to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs should be enforced . The biggest exacerbating factor in safe crowd management is the use and abuse of alcohol, it adversely affects spectator behaviour and seriously affects spectator understanding, response and activity in the event of an emergency.

Where free seating (standing room) is offered for sale, an appropriate reduction in stadium permitted capacity should be required and less tickets released for sale.

Adequate public address systems both inside and outside the stadia is recommended.

Consideration of spectator separation at certain matches, due cognisance being given to the planning of separate and clearly defined entrances for rival supporters to enter and depart the stadium.

The pre-sale of tickets is recommended. Unfortunately, the soccer spectator in this country is most unlikely to purchase tickets in advance. Thus, sufficient ticket sales positions at the stadium must be provided, situated well away from the entrances, to facilitate prompt ticket sales to arriving crowds.

Provision of extensive close circuit television systems at all stadia, this system being monitored within the JOC and operated by trained personnel with immediate access to stadium management.

Secure channelling at all entry points. This is critical for line up of spectators and regulating flow into the stadium. However, in our opinion, scaffolding should never be used but rather collapsible, free standing fencing, which is readily available. As soon as the crowd is admitted, this temporary queue chute type fencing to be removed and stacked well clear of any gate or crowd flow area.

A counting mechanism to determine actual flow into the stadium, thus at any given time, an accurate figure is available of spectator occupancy and available stadium capacity.

Effective ticket design – in addition, the author would recommend that only one agency be permitted to issue or sell tickets. It is present practice at some stadia, for tickets to be sold by a ticketing agency, as well as the venue itself, together with various sponsor organisations issuing their own complimentary tickets or passes. This practice is obviously exceptionally dangerous.

The report also comments that the number of turnstiles/entrances, should be commensurate with the capacity of the stadium. It is recommended that the entrances should be capable of admitting a capacity audience within one hour, as is the accepted United Kingdom criteria.

Stadia should also ensure sufficient parking is available. On the night of the Ellis Park disaster, surrounding roads were gridlocked, denying fast access to emergency vehicles. Unfortunately, this recommendation will be hard to comply with as available parking around many stadia is limited, therefore efficient planning and pro-active action by the applicable Traffic Regulating Authorities is critical.

Rehearsal by security personnel of essential parts of the plan is recommended.

Members of the security personnel and other staff must be dressed in easily distinguishable and highly visible uniform.

The report recommends the engagement of only a limited number of security service provider companies, a lack of communication and co-ordination between different companies being a detrimental effect of employing several companies to work at any given match.

A distinction is made between the club stewards (personnel employed and controlled by the clubs) and regular security personnel, that the stewards perform limited tasks and cannot be involved in security related decisions or enforce security matters.

Analysis

The report is well researched and the recommendations correct and well intended.

A large focus of the report was on the implied lack of training/skills of security personnel on duty at the time of the disaster. Whilst the author concurs that this is indeed an issue, it must be borne in mind that the overall responsibility must lie with the senior personnel present, including specifically, the police and stadium management. It is a specific Police management responsibility to monitor and regulate crowd activity outside the stadium and to plan and implement measures to successfully contain any crowd disturbance or disruptive behaviour. Private security officials are not empowered/equipped or employed to regulate large disruptive crowds outside stadiums in public areas.

It must also be noted that when the match was cancelled, the stadium was evacuated safely and crowd departed without any further problems, implying that many of the evacuation measures and security personnel were working efficiently.

It was and still is the stadiums responsibility to provide sufficient points of entry to the venue as well as suitable infrastructures to sell tickets, have sufficient cash change, provide collapsible fencing as queue chutes, provide a functional public address systems and many other such essential measures. The Security Officer on the ground as well as the company employed as a security service provider, is powerless to provide or insist on these facilities.

To separate the club stewards from security personnel in the nature of their duties and responsibilities is also well intentioned. However, the fact of the matter is that those club stewards should be employed for the full duration of the match, be trained and uniformed and remain on post until the stadium is vacated of spectators after a match. On arrival, the spectator is directed to his seat by such stewards, who also provide ongoing information to the spectator on the whereabouts of vendors, rest rooms and other matters.

It is logical therefore, that in the event of an emergency, the spectator will look to the nearest steward for guidance and hopefully obey the stewards instructions. Whilst we agree that Security personnel should deal with enforcement of required measures, the club steward (there should be at least a couple of hundred on duty) have a very important role to play and should therefore be trained, uniformed and regulated appropriately.

The report calls for a Senior Police Officer to be in charge of crowd management at soccer matches. This is a natural decision. However, the Police Officer in charge must be well briefed on the stadium layout and have extensive crowd management experience. It is dangerous to assume any given senior police officer has sufficient experience or ability to manage such a critical responsibility automatically.

Once accepted, there should be onerous fines and penalties implemented by the appropriate authority for non-compliance. In particular, the stadiums must be compelled to provide the infrastructures required to manage large crowds safely and not permitted to sell alcohol. These measures subject to frequent and unannounced audit.

The Police must be required to commit themselves to providing an appropriate level of trained manpower to regulate crowds, especially outside the stadiums, supported by sufficient vehicles, razor wire and any other equipment they may deem necessary for the efficient performance of their duties.

Conclusion

In summary, the Ellis Park crowd safety breakdown would probably not have occurred, or the consequences would have been less serious, had effective crowd management systems been applied. This includes having in place the correct stadium security perimeter infrastructure; fixed seating, appropriately located and staffed onsite ticket outlets; and, the appropriate deployment of properly equipped police in sufficient numbers to address any disruptive crowd gatherings outside the stadium.

Finally, and most importantly, the chances of another South African soccer crowd tragedy occurring will undoubtedly be more remote should the recommendations of the Ngoepe report be accepted and implemented.

About the author:

John Van Stan is owner and head of Tracker Event Services a South African firm specialising in crowd management planning and operations.

John has 15 years of extensive experience in co-ordinating security and public safety for a wide variety of major public entertainment and sporting events. In particular, John specialises in music concert tour security and stadium shows.

He has served in the police, military and fire services.